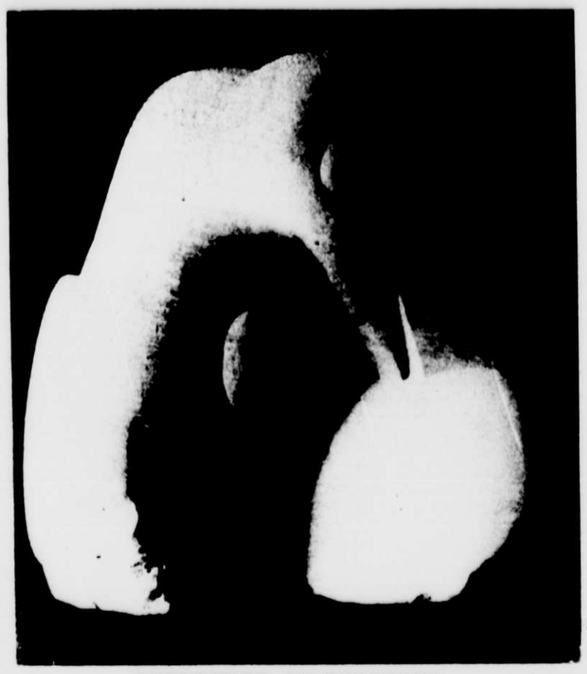
WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE WORLD OF ART



SCULPTURE, BY BRANCUSI.
On exhibition, Modern Gallery.

IT is not every Academy that has its president lead off with the best picture in its exhibition, yet so it is with our Academy this time. It is too bad that the current "Winter" exhibition touches so low a level in artistic interest that the feat just performed by Mr. Weir upon his debut as president of the society is robbed of much of its significance. Nevertheless his portrait of an elderly woman in white is a good picture.

It is not a work that will be talked about especially. Artists who pass along the line in the Vanderbilt Gallery estimating the varying degrees of success of their rivals will say as they see it, "That's good," and then no doubt they will speedily forget it. It has quiet charms, however, which if not sensational will wear well in a portrait. The artist uses the palette of the impressionists, but as the sitter is posed indoors he has restrained the color to a quiet pearly tone and has put nothing into the design by way of embellishment. It is simplicity itself.

It calls attention anew to the making of portraits, which with landscapes are the two branches of art into which the Americans seem determined to restrict their efforts. It is just a case of an elderly lady sitting upon a chair in a room. Even the room is vague and nothing is certain about it except that it has a window. Nevertheless there is more in the picture than the lady. There is always more in a portrait than the sitter. That extra something is the quality that gives the picture its art value, if it has any—the personality of the artist. Artists without personality at all—and it is surprising how many of them there are—give us nothing but the sitters, who might just as well have been photographed for all the interest the outside world will take in these effigies.

The prize winning portrait of Cecilia Beaux of a lady, presumably from Philadelphia, in an ermine tippet and toque, writing with one glove on and one glove off at an Empire table, is as apposite as one could wish. It has embellishments with a vengeance, and bravura painting besides. Nevertheless artists will say, "Clever, but I don't like it." This cannot be explained upon the ground that they have taken a fancied dislike to the sitter (who is vividly realized), for artists will stand even Senators in art if only Velasquez paint them, and even art critics if painted by Whistler, but must rather be attributed to some essential shallowness in the artist's attitude toward her subject, who in spite of the expensive fur tippet and toque is a human being, we trust. The word "noble" is not a word that will be applied to the picture save by sycophants and flatterers, of whom they are, alas, some in every community. One fears that Miss Beaux prefers being "in society" to being noble.

One thing she succeeds in always, however, and that is in giving all of her people the air of being from Philadelphia. This is nothing against them of course. On the contrary, it adds to their interest. There is a certain obliqueness of vision that is very characteristic. It comes from their way of life. In Philadelphia one must live north or south of a certain street, Market street, I believe it is called; and from infancy the good Philadelphians are taught to assume the look of not being aware of where they are when they are discovered on the wrong side of this dividing line. There has developed in consequence in the best type of Philadelphians a certain expression of Chinoiserie that is captivating, once you know what it is and whence it comes.

We have mentioned painting No. 1 in point of merit, and painting No. 1 in point of interest; now is there any one else that should be mentioned? Usually of late years we have been compelled to place George Bellows prominently in the list; but really this year he doesn't deserve to be mentioned at all. However, it is a penalty for past successes that his present performances, however wanting, must be dragged into the light and weighed. Both canvases that are shown are but color studies apparently, or at least no other category comes to mind in which they may be placed.

One is a nude, a three-quarter length girl with a parrot. Back of the nude figure is a wide space of repellent purple which is equally shocking next to the livid green of the parrot and next to a red drapery at the other side of the painting. The colors all through the picture are hot and objectionable. Color has never been the most admired feature of this talented artist's output, therefore he is quite right to study it and to enrich his experience in color. He has been ill advised in submitting such crude studies to the public, however.

The hanging committee, in desperation as to where to hang so warm a proposition, finally had a lucky inspiration and hung it next to Jonas Lie's big fishing boat picture, which is just as terrifying to contemplate. The two pictures shriek to heaven in their corner in mighty dissonances. In a way they offset each other and it is certainly wise to segregate evil in this fashion. If Mr. Watrous's "Dregs" could have been added to the group an even greater public service would have been rendered.

The landscapes in the Winter Academy are so like the usual run of landscapes in Academy exhibitions that one fancies they are the identical works. We have one or two men who send the same subjects year after year without varying the details or the mood of their pictures, although "mood" is too handsome a word to associate with them; and these are the ones the juries love to honor. These artists paint this thing that they paint glibly enough, but they have no power to awaken our emotions, to stir us, or entertain us, for the landscape to their unimaginative souls represents nothing but facts. They never play a game with their landscapes. They never try one element against another in working out their themes. In a word, they never see a motif. They have lost the sense of atmosphere that even the despised Hudson River school enjoyed.

The above paragraph is written really for a group of painters to whom Ernest Lawson does not belong. His winter landscape is the best in the exhibition, although it is far too big for my taste. He has painted a hillside covered with snow and the white mass of the hill advances to the eye unmistakably but in a subtle fashion. There is something so intense about it that one feels that Lawson made the foreground come forward just by sheer will power. The snow covered bridge and bushes in the centre of the canvas would, however, have been enough for the picture. About twelve inches of canvas can be spared on either side.

Robert Spencer, who gained a landscape prize a year or so ago and showed a tendency to repeat his effects, is observed to be trying to break away from the rut. He deserves praise for the attempt. He has an agreeable, refined, rather too modish palette, but if he were to have continued painting that old factory in Philadelphia in those pearly tones of his until the end of time he would have developed into as great a bore as those three Academicians who have already been scolded, although their names are not mentioned. He has been hunting the secret for making buildings romantic, and mysterious, and has succeeded enough at least to show that he has become dissatisfied with bare and unadorned facts. There is a row of tenements in his picture that is so attractive that one would like to live in them, and there are some itinerant venders and women purchasers thrown in for your money.

Mr. Spencer exhibits for the first time here a figure piece, which has obvious merits and defects. A lady sits by a tea table in a room furnished with genuine antiques. (Trust Philadelphia for that!) The lady is drawn nicely and the antiques are drawn nicely. It is so pleasant to find a landscapist who isn't content with his own landscapes and who also does figures well that there is a temptation to tell him frankly, as man to man, what the trouble is with his lady drinking tea. After all, why not?

In the first place the lady is merely posing. The room is probably a real room and the artist called to the lady and said "Sit here; there is a good light here." Then he moved the work table further away to help the composition and then at the last decided to put in some tea things to make a glitter and to give himself a chance to do some showy painting.

My impression is that there are about forty pictures of interiors and still lifes in the Winter Academy that were undertaken by the artists and carried out in a manner as perfunctory as this described, but as they are not drawn as nicely nor colored as nicely as Mr. Spencer's they sha'n't have the benefit of a special criticism like this.

The sitter sits upon her chair and very nearly conceals the fact that posing for a picture isn't all the fun that it is cracked up to be. The tea table is, for the sake of the composition, almost back of her, and the poor victim cannot readily get at it for the necessary refreshment. Ah, that was a serious error, Mr. Spencer, to place it there. It almost implies a lack of humor upon your part, or perhaps too much. Too much is as bad as not enough. Incidentally, I don't like the way you serve tea to your models. And there is only one cup! I don't know what the rules of studio etiquette are in Philadelphia, but I have some acquaintance with the atelier customs of Paris, which have the merit at least of being human. There, when the model faints with fatigue, no one dreams of touching a button, ordering tea from a prim maid and placing the single cup of tea where the lady can scarcely sniff the perfume. Made as your maid makes it, in that outlandish rig of yours, I dare say your tea has no perfume. But that doesn't affect the principle involved.

No, Mr. Spencer, not only the etiquette but the whole spirit of the picture is wrong. If when the idea of painting a lady drinking tea first occurred to you you had considered some of the significances of tea drinking you might have seized the more permanent aspects of the case. Did you say to yourself, "I am going to paint such a picture of a lady drinking tea that everybody henceforth will refer to her as the Tea Drinker, just as they call Michelangelo's thinking man 'The Thinker'"? Did you realize you have but one life to live and but one set of pictures to paint? Did you say, "This is to be my tea drinking picture. I dedicate it to tea drinkers. I will put all I know of tea drinking into it. I will make a beautiful tea drinker. All the rest of my life this will represent my attitude in early manhood toward tea drinkers. I will do this now and be done with it. Once I have finished this, I will never paint another tea drinker as long as I live. This will be my tea drinker"?

Had you asked yourself these questions, Mr. Spencer, I don't think you would have placed the tea outfit in such awkward relationship to the consumer. In fact, I think you would have altered the picture considerably.

And now, au revoir. I am rather inclined to like your work, and that is why I have enjoyed this chat.

"It is this will of matter expressed in shapes and volume that I call plasticity. This power, this will, is not solely found imprisoned in matter itself. It is a natural force that corresponds to our own instinct. In looking at a tower whose height is too great a feeling of disquiet comes over us. We feel that the material labors under strain and does not find itself normally conditioned. In the same way any object in which the needs of the material have been respected transmits to us a sense of satisfaction. It is from this that contact between us and a work of plastic art derives.

"It is therefore the plasticity of the image that awakes sensations in us; and the most indifferent object reveals itself to us with an unfamiliar force and charm if this object is interpreted by a purely plastic means, independently of what a work of plastic art represents; it is solely by its plasticity that it speaks to us. Plasticity is the poetry of plastic art. It is its essence. To seek its poetry elsewhere is to draw it toward error."

The above is by Eli Nadelman, whose sculptures now on exhibition in the gallery of the Photo-Secession certainly make their effects largely through plastic qualities they possess. They are so plastic that one can appreciate the value that the sculptor puts upon this quality in his little article, which has some of the amiable exaggerations of youth.

"It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the development of Nubian handicrafts in the Middle Empire was due to the Egyptian artisans brought by the Egyptian army of occupation. The statuettes, although almost exclusively of local stones, are characteristically Egyptian in form and technique, and they represent in every case Egyptians living in a foreign land in which there is, up to the present, no trace of a native sculptural art."

From the account of the Nubian excavations of the Harvard expedition, in the Boston Museum's *Bulletin*. Think of the explanations that will be given by learned scientists 2,000 years hence when they dig the machine made Renaissance and Grecian architectural ornaments from the dust heaps that will have long covered New York city by then!

The prospectus of the new English magazine called *Form* is a sufficiently curious document, considering the circumstances of the time. The list of writers and artists enrolled includes some of the best names in England. Part of it is as follows:

"When the general failure of politics has revealed the primitive emotions which underlie international relationships, and the contention of one nation with another implies the presence not only of energy but of ideas, not only of wealth but of character, more than ever is it necessary that the arts should declare themselves and emphasize their permanent resources.

"In the period immediately preceding a great social upheaval, art, ever the first to be affected by the undercurrent of unrest, bears witness to it in abstract forms of expression; but its activity is no less certain because during war and rumors of war the ordinary channels are not any longer available to carry it into the minds of those capable of receiving and being influenced by it.

"The common though false belief that art prospers best amid material prosperity is responsible both for the too innocent dependence of artists upon the commercial machine by which dealers, editors and clerks of all sorts persuade art to serve their purposes instead of its own and also for the fact that this machine, becoming disorganized, can no longer be useful unless it be in the service of commonplace and ephemeral talents whose importance is momentarily exaggerated by popular clamors and passing excitements.

"Significant at the same time is the failure of societies and guilds, which, while professing to watch over the interests of art, betray their real incapacity to organize, in the face of a dire need, the civilizing forces whose value they should be the first to appreciate and set in motion. Thus by a consent too general to be overlooked the artist, who is at all times a real leader of thought whose labors mark the highest practical achievement of brain and hand, must either suffer extinction or, possessing still his power to invent and initiate, take a new exhilaration from the conflict and find freedom in being so completely rid of many unfaithful friends at once.

"So long as men can sincerely mourn the loss of Rheims and Louvain, the cause of civilization is one with the cause of art, and every evidence of creative power is of immediate value. This being true it might yet be possible to take too abstract a view of the case, regretting the destruction of so much monumental craftsmanship without staying to appreciate at its real worth the genius of our own time, and the part it must bear in the creation of new forms of beauty.

"Those who are responsible for this magazine not only realize and are guided by the profound intellectual changes that are the outcome of the present social upheaval but they have reason to be confident in providing generous scope for many fine active talents in art and literature.

"With no desire to mislay among wordy definitions the settled convictions which stand behind this project, it may yet be stated that form implies not their outward evidence alone but is the effect of shapely ideas variously at work upon material. This, the true balance of imaginative and technical values, includes therefore all the resources of mind and method, and sets art free in the widest sense from arbitrary standards of taste imposed by any effeminate conception as to its origin and purpose tending to relegate the artist and his work to a place remote from the vital concerns of mankind.

"The general subject matter is consistent with a care for unchanging human interests expressed in poetry and other deliberate writing having relation to the organic scheme of the magazine. The drawings and the writings, however, stand independently of each other."

"EN CANOT," BY MARY CASSATT.
On exhibition, Durand-Ruel Galleries.

"THE BATHERS," BY MAX WEBER.
Exhibition in the Montross Galleries.

"CARVING," BY MAX WEBER.
On exhibition, Montross Galleries.

"NOIRMONTIER," BY RENOIR.
On exhibition, Durand-Ruel Galleries.